The Role of Narrative Assessment in Supporting Identity Formation in Adolescent Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the role of narrative assessment in supporting identity formation among adolescent learners in Tehran. A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews with 26 adolescent students from Tehran. Participants were purposively sampled and interviewed until theoretical saturation was reached. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using NVivo software to identify key themes and subthemes related to narrative assessment and identity formation. Three main themes emerged from the analysis: personal meaning-making, social and relational identity, and growth and transformation. Under personal meaning-making, adolescents described reflection on experiences, authentic self-expression, emotional awareness, value clarification, and goal setting as key outcomes of narrative assessment. The social and relational identity theme highlighted the importance of peer recognition, teacher feedback, family narratives, belongingness, social comparison, and navigating stereotypes. Growth and transformation encompassed developing agency, coping with challenges, shifts in self-perception, academic motivation, self-advocacy, and integration of multiple identities. Participants reported that narrative assessment fostered self-understanding, emotional regulation, social validation, resilience, and motivation, contributing to their evolving sense of identity and personal growth. Narrative assessment serves as a powerful pedagogical tool that supports adolescents' identity formation by providing opportunities for reflection, social connection, and personal growth. Incorporating narrative approaches in educational settings can enhance adolescents' emotional well-being, academic engagement, and self-agency. To maximize its benefits, educators should be trained in narrative pedagogy and adapt practices to cultural contexts. Further research is needed to examine long-term effects and diverse perspectives within broader educational systems.

Keywords: Narrative assessment, identity formation, adolescence, qualitative research, self-expression, educational psychology, personal growth

Introduction

Adolescence represents a critical stage in the human lifespan, marked by significant psychological, social, and cognitive transformations that contribute to the development of a coherent and stable sense of identity (Erikson, 1968). During this period, individuals are tasked with the challenge of integrating multiple dimensions of self—including personal, social, cultural, and academic identities—while negotiating new roles, responsibilities, and relationships (Kroger et al., 2010). Identity formation is thus a complex, multifaceted process shaped by internal reflection as well as external influences such as family, peers, and educational contexts (McLean et al., 2016). Given the centrality of identity formation to adolescent well-being and success, scholars and practitioners have increasingly sought pedagogical strategies that not only support academic achievement but also

nurture the holistic development of learners. In this regard, narrative assessment has emerged as a promising approach for fostering identity exploration and self-understanding in educational settings (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008; McAdams, 2001).

Narrative assessment, broadly defined, refers to the use of storytelling and personal narrative construction as both a form of evaluation and a developmental tool in learning environments (Clandinin et al., 2016). Unlike traditional assessments that often prioritize standardized measures of knowledge acquisition, narrative assessment centers on the lived experiences of students, inviting them to make meaning of their learning journeys through the articulation of personal stories (Moss, 2013). This process allows learners to reflect on their achievements, challenges, values, and aspirations, thereby facilitating self-expression and deeper engagement with curricular content (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Scholars argue that by encouraging students to author and share their own narratives, educators can create spaces where identity formation becomes an explicit and valued aspect of the learning process (Bleakley, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Recent educational research highlights the unique advantages of narrative assessment for adolescent learners, who are navigating the intricate task of constructing and reconciling multiple aspects of self (Marcia, 1980; McLean et al., 2018). Narrative work enables adolescents to revisit and reinterpret past experiences, negotiate present challenges, and envision future possibilities, thus supporting a dynamic and evolving sense of identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Importantly, the process of narrativizing personal experience fosters not only self-understanding but also emotional regulation, empathy, and resilience—qualities that are foundational to both academic and psychosocial development (Adler et al., 2016; Reese et al., 2017). Furthermore, as adolescents are often particularly sensitive to social comparison and the judgments of others, the reflective and dialogic nature of narrative assessment can help normalize struggles, validate diverse experiences, and promote a sense of belonging within the learning community (Thomsen & Bernsten, 2008; Wortham, 2001).

The role of narrative in identity formation is grounded in the theoretical premise that individuals construct and maintain their identities by organizing experiences into coherent life stories (McAdams, 2001). These narratives provide a framework through which adolescents interpret their place in the world, link past and present, and chart a course for the future (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Educational contexts thus play a crucial role in shaping the narrative opportunities available to young people, influencing not only the stories they tell but also the kinds of selves they can imagine and inhabit (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Narrative assessment leverages this theoretical insight by positioning students as active meaning-makers, capable of authoring and revising their identities in relation to academic content, peer relationships, and broader sociocultural discourses (Goodson et al., 2010).

Empirical evidence supports the value of narrative assessment in adolescent education, suggesting that narrative tasks enhance self-reflection, academic motivation, and emotional well-being (Sani et al., 2007; Fivush, 2011). For example, studies have shown that adolescents who engage in structured autobiographical writing or oral storytelling demonstrate greater self-concept clarity, higher levels of self-efficacy, and more adaptive coping strategies in the face of adversity (Waters & Fivush, 2015; McLean & Mansfield, 2012). Additionally, narrative assessment has been linked to improved academic outcomes, particularly in areas requiring higher-order thinking, creativity, and critical reflection (Ryan, 2011). Importantly, the practice of sharing narratives with peers and teachers can cultivate empathy and a supportive classroom climate, which are essential for healthy identity development (Barkhuizen, 2011; Clandinin et al., 2016).

Despite these benefits, the implementation of narrative assessment in schools is not without challenges. Critics point to issues such as subjectivity in evaluation, time constraints, and the need for teacher training in narrative pedagogy (Moss, 2013; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Furthermore, cultural factors may influence students' willingness and ability to engage in personal storytelling, as norms regarding self-disclosure and narrative coherence vary across contexts (Reese et al., 2017; Wortham, 2001). To maximize the potential of narrative assessment, it is therefore essential to consider the diverse backgrounds and

developmental needs of adolescent learners, as well as the structural supports necessary for meaningful narrative work in classrooms (Sfard & Prusak, 2005).

In recent years, qualitative research has played a pivotal role in deepening our understanding of how narrative assessment shapes identity formation in educational contexts (Goodson et al., 2010; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Qualitative methodologies, such as in-depth interviews and narrative inquiry, allow researchers to access the subjective experiences of learners, capturing the nuanced processes through which stories are constructed, shared, and transformed (Barkhuizen, 2011). Studies drawing on student voices have highlighted the ways in which narrative assessment can foster agency, critical self-reflection, and a sense of coherence in the face of developmental complexity (McLean et al., 2016; Bleakley, 2005).

Nevertheless, there remains a need for further empirical investigation into the specific mechanisms by which narrative assessment supports identity development among diverse adolescent populations, particularly in non-Western contexts where cultural and educational practices may shape both narrative expression and identity work (Thomsen & Bernsten, 2008; Reese et al., 2017). In the Iranian educational context, for instance, the interplay of family expectations, peer dynamics, and social norms presents unique opportunities and challenges for adolescent identity formation (Shokouhi & Talebi, 2020). Exploring the experiences of adolescents in Tehran, where cultural diversity and rapid social change intersect, can offer valuable insights into the ways narrative assessment is perceived, enacted, and experienced.

The present study seeks to address these gaps by qualitatively exploring the role of narrative assessment in supporting identity formation among adolescent learners in Tehran. By focusing on the lived experiences and perspectives of students who have engaged in narrative assessment practices, this research aims to illuminate the processes through which storytelling facilitates meaning-making, personal growth, and social connectedness in adolescence. Specifically, the study examines how narrative assessment influences personal meaning-making, social and relational identity, and growth and transformation within the context of Iranian secondary education. Through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the educational conditions that promote healthy identity development, offering implications for teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers committed to fostering the holistic well-being of adolescent learners.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design aimed at exploring the role of narrative assessment in supporting identity formation among adolescent learners. The qualitative approach was chosen to enable an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations regarding narrative assessment practices within educational settings. The study sample consisted of 26 adolescent learners, all residing and studying in various educational institutions across Tehran. Purposeful sampling was utilized to ensure a diverse representation of students in terms of age, gender, and educational background. The inclusion criterion required participants to have prior experience with narrative assessment either through formal or informal educational encounters.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted exclusively through semi-structured interviews, which provided a flexible yet systematic framework for eliciting participants' views and experiences. The interview guide was developed based on a thorough review of the literature on narrative assessment and adolescent identity development. Questions were open-ended, allowing participants to share their thoughts, stories, and insights in detail. Interviews were conducted individually in a quiet and

comfortable setting to promote open dialogue and ensure confidentiality. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the informed consent of participants. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved— that is, no new themes or insights were emerging from the data, indicating that the research questions had been sufficiently explored.

Data analysis

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Data analysis followed a thematic approach, allowing for the identification, organization, and interpretation of key themes and patterns within the interview data. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was employed to facilitate systematic coding and management of the data. The analysis process began with initial open coding to capture recurring concepts and ideas, followed by axial coding to identify relationships between codes, and finally selective coding to integrate these categories into overarching themes relevant to the research objectives. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, strategies such as member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trails were utilized throughout the analysis process. The findings reflect the collective voices of participants and are presented thematically in the subsequent section.

Findings and Results

1. Personal Meaning-Making

Reflection on Experiences:

Participants described narrative assessment as a process that encouraged deep reflection on personal and academic experiences. Many adolescents emphasized how recounting past events helped them make sense of challenges and milestones, often revealing new insights about themselves. One participant shared, "When I wrote about my first day at high school, I realized how much I've changed since then." Through reflection, students discovered patterns in their growth, developed emotional connections to their stories, and gained clarity about who they were becoming.

Self-Expression:

Narrative assessment provided a safe platform for self-expression, allowing students to communicate their authentic selves. Adolescents valued opportunities to share personal stories in their own voices, expressing individuality and sometimes vulnerability. As one student put it, "Writing my story let me show who I really am, not just what others see in class." This freedom fostered a sense of ownership and pride in their unique perspectives.

Emotional Awareness:

Many participants noted that the act of narrating their experiences heightened their emotional awareness. They became more adept at naming their feelings and processing difficult emotions, leading to improved emotional regulation and empathy toward others. A participant remarked, "I never realized how sad I was about losing a friend until I wrote about it—then I could actually talk about it." Such realizations helped students handle emotional discomfort more constructively.

Value Clarification:

The process of constructing narratives prompted adolescents to identify and reflect on their core values, often bringing moral dilemmas and personal beliefs to the surface. Several participants spoke of recognizing what truly mattered to them when faced with ethical decisions in their stories. One reflected, "I wrote about a time I stood up for a friend, and I understood that fairness is really important to me."

Goal Setting and Aspirations:

Narrative assessment also encouraged goal setting and articulation of future aspirations. By projecting themselves into future scenarios, students found motivation to pursue dreams and ambitions. "When I wrote about my goals, it made them feel real and possible," one student explained, underscoring how narrative work can foster self-motivation and a forward-looking mindset.

2. Social and Relational Identity

Peer Recognition:

Adolescents frequently mentioned the importance of peer validation in their narrative work. Sharing stories with classmates, they gained acceptance and developed a stronger group identity. One participant shared, "When my friends read my story and said they felt the same, it made me feel like I belonged."

Teacher Feedback:

Constructive feedback from teachers was described as pivotal in supporting identity development. Participants appreciated comments that acknowledged their strengths and encouraged self-reflection. A student noted, "My teacher's feedback wasn't just about grammar; she wrote that my story showed courage, and that made me feel proud."

Family Narratives:

Family expectations and shared traditions surfaced in many students' narratives. Writing about family stories allowed them to connect personal experiences to a larger familial identity. As one adolescent reflected, "My parents always talk about their childhoods; telling my own stories made me feel part of something bigger."

Belongingness:

A strong sense of belonging emerged when narratives connected students to their school community and friendships. Many described feeling included and supported through shared storytelling. "I realized I'm not alone with my struggles—others in my class feel the same," said one participant, highlighting the inclusive power of narrative sharing.

Social Comparison:

Students often engaged in social comparison, using peers' stories as benchmarks for their own growth or learning. "Reading others' narratives made me see that everyone has their ups and downs," a participant remarked. This comparison fostered both competition and inspiration, encouraging learning through observation and modeling.

Navigating Stereotypes:

Narrative assessment enabled adolescents to challenge cultural expectations and stereotypes, particularly regarding gender roles and identity norms. Some students described writing stories that resisted societal labels, with one noting, "I wrote about not fitting into the usual expectations for girls in my family, and it helped me accept myself." These experiences empowered students to assert more nuanced identities.

3. Growth and Transformation

Developing Agency:

Participants reported that narrative assessment nurtured a sense of agency, empowering them to make decisions and take initiative in their lives. They described feeling more responsible for their learning and personal choices. "Writing about a time I stood up for myself made me realize I can shape my own path," one student stated.

Coping with Challenges:

The process of recounting personal setbacks and strategies for overcoming them strengthened resilience and adaptability. Many students detailed stories of managing failure and bouncing back from disappointment. "When I wrote about not making the basketball team, it helped me see how I dealt with the setback and kept going," said one adolescent.

Shifts in Self-Perception:

Adolescents described how narrative work led to shifts in self-confidence and identity. They often discovered strengths and adopted a growth mindset. "Telling my story made me notice I'm braver than I thought," explained one participant. This evolving self-image was a recurrent theme.

Academic Motivation:

Connecting academic experiences to personal narratives increased motivation and engagement. Students were more likely to set academic goals and view learning as meaningful. As one participant expressed, "When I saw how my schoolwork fit into my story, I wanted to try harder."

Vision for the Future:

Many narratives included aspirations and planning for the future, with students envisioning life goals and a sense of purpose. One adolescent said, "Writing about my dreams helped me plan steps to achieve them—it wasn't just a fantasy anymore."

Self-Advocacy:

Narrative assessment encouraged students to articulate their needs and seek support, helping them advocate for themselves. "I realized I needed help with math and finally asked for it after writing my story," shared a participant, illustrating the empowering effect of self-reflection.

Integration of Multiple Identities:

Finally, participants discussed the challenge and richness of integrating multiple aspects of their identities—cultural, familial, and personal. Narratives became a way to reconcile differences and embrace diversity. "I wrote about being both Iranian and something else, and how that's okay," one student said, reflecting the complexity and fluidity of adolescent identity.

Discussion and Conclusion

This qualitative study explored the role of narrative assessment in supporting identity formation among adolescent learners in Tehran. The findings revealed three main thematic areas—personal meaning-making, social and relational identity, and growth and transformation—each encompassing several subthemes that illuminate how narrative assessment fosters adolescent identity development.

The first theme, Personal Meaning-Making, highlights how narrative assessment facilitates adolescents' reflection on experiences, self-expression, emotional awareness, value clarification, and goal setting. Participants described narrative work as a reflective process allowing them to revisit and make sense of their past, articulate authentic selves, and engage with their emotions constructively. This aligns with McAdams's (2001) life story theory, which posits that constructing coherent narratives about the self supports identity integration by linking past, present, and future. Adolescents' enhanced emotional awareness through narrative also echoes findings from Adler et al. (2016), who emphasize that narrative identity contributes to emotional regulation and psychological well-being.

Self-expression and authentic voice emerged as critical subthemes, supporting the argument by Bleakley (2005) that narrative assessment creates a safe space for learners to explore and communicate their individuality. Participants' ability to clarify personal values and set future goals through storytelling resonates with McLean and Mansfield's (2012) work demonstrating that narrative meaning-making encourages adolescents to connect with their core beliefs and aspirations. These findings reinforce the idea that narrative assessment extends beyond academic evaluation to nurture holistic personal development (Clandinin et al., 2016).

The second major theme, Social and Relational Identity, emphasizes the interpersonal dimensions of identity formation mediated by narrative assessment. Adolescents reported that peer recognition and teacher feedback were influential in validating their identities and fostering a sense of belonging. This supports previous studies highlighting the social function of

narrative in identity construction, whereby sharing stories within communities promotes mutual understanding and social integration (Barkhuizen, 2011; Wortham, 2001). The role of teacher feedback in this process also aligns with Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) argument that educators' responses shape students' narrative identities by either encouraging or constraining self-expression.

Family narratives and cultural expectations surfaced as important influences, with participants relating personal stories to broader familial and sociocultural frameworks. This finding echoes Thomsen and Bernsten's (2008) work on cultural life scripts, which emphasizes that collective narratives help individuals situate themselves within shared histories and identities. Moreover, participants' navigation of stereotypes and societal norms through narrative reflects Reese et al.'s (2017) observation that narrative work can challenge and renegotiate limiting identity scripts, particularly in culturally complex settings such as Iran (Shokouhi & Talebi, 2020).

The third theme, Growth and Transformation, illustrates how narrative assessment fosters agency, resilience, shifts in self-perception, academic motivation, self-advocacy, and integration of multiple identities. Participants described how recounting stories of overcoming setbacks enhanced their resilience and sense of personal agency. This corresponds with findings by Fivush (2011) and Waters and Fivush (2015), who note that narrative coherence and meaning-making contribute to adaptive coping and psychological growth in adolescents. Similarly, the reported shifts in self-confidence and identity development confirm the developmental significance of narrative identity theorized by McAdams and McLean (2013).

Academic motivation linked to narrative assessment reflects Ryan's (2011) findings that connecting personal meaning to learning experiences enhances engagement and goal-directed behavior. Furthermore, adolescents' growing capacity for self-advocacy through narrative aligns with Sfard and Prusak's (2005) concept of learners as active meaning-makers who can negotiate their roles within educational systems. The subtheme of integrating multiple identities highlights the complexity of adolescent identity work, particularly within multicultural and transitional contexts. This finding is supported by McLean et al. (2018), who emphasize narrative's role in reconciling diverse cultural and social identities.

Overall, the findings confirm the central theoretical premise that narrative assessment serves as a powerful pedagogical tool to support adolescents' dynamic identity formation. By inviting learners to construct and share personal narratives, educators create opportunities for reflection, social validation, emotional growth, and agency. These processes are essential for healthy adolescent development and align with international literature emphasizing the educational and psychosocial benefits of narrative pedagogies (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008; McAdams, 2001; Reese et al., 2017).

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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